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ABSTRACT

The absence of a multicultural curriculum has been a major contributing factor to the low achievement and the high school drop-out rate of minority students. It has also contributed to negative teacher attitudes toward these students. A multicultural curriculum can be viewed in two ways by educators: (1) as a necessary evil implemented to appease the vocal minority, and (2) as an attempt to meet the student demand for curriculum relevance. In the second case, a multicultural curriculum has the potential of becoming a viable and exciting concept. This scholarly discussion indicates that developing a multicultural curriculum requires a change in educators' attitudes, materials, and instructional methodologies. Educators need to examine the nature, the rationale for, and the methods of implementing a multicultural curriculum. These issues are explained. (Author/BS)

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Multicultural Education: A Closer Look

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Multicultural Education: A Closer Look

Most of you recall the number one best seller a few years back by the name of Jonathan Livingston Seagull. In that symbolic novel Jonathan speaks of very simple things--"the right for a gull to fly, that freedom is the very nature of his being, that whatever stands against that freedom must be set aside, be it ritual or superstition in any form." Jonathan finds a higher purpose for life when he discovers the glory of flight. In his race to learn he sees no limits. Jonathan's teachings, however significant, were not readily accepted, and he was ostracized by those who didn't understand him.

Like Jonathan, we as educators are anxious to enter students in this "race to learn." Unfortunately, however, we are often not in agreement as to the exact nature of the "learning race" that we should be running. In the field of human relations and multicultural education, we again like Jonathan, have historically been beset by those who "refused to open their eyes and see"--that is, those who made no attempt to understand. Fortunately, in the last decade the concept of "multiculturalism" has increasingly worked its way into the vocabulary--and the minds--of educators. The concept is by no means a new one, having originated in the early 1920s in the writings of the philosopher Horace Keller who used the term "cultural pluralism" in expounding the importance of maintaining cultural diversities within the United States. Today, we are continually striving to remove those obstacles--those limitations of which

Jonathan spoke--which prevent individuals from achieving their full potential. Understandably, these changes have been slow in coming. They will not be made overnight. In the area of human relations, meaningful societal and educational changes require greater efforts and greater patience.

An examination of the literature concerning minority education reveals several problem areas: segregated minority schools, physically inferior schools in minority areas, low achievement and high drop-out rate of minority students, negative teacher attitudes toward minority students, and the absence of multicultural curriculum emphasis. Problems one and two (segregated and inferior minority schools) stem from residential patterns, school boundaries, and inequities in the allocation of monies to different schools. Curriculum personnel have little input in such matters. The last three concerns however, are specific curriculum problems. The absence of multicultural curriculum emphasis has played a major factor in contributing to the low achievement and resulting high drop-out rate of minority students, which has in turn led to negative teacher attitudes. How far the schools go toward multiculturalizing the curriculum depends on how the particular teacher, administrator, or school district approaches the concept of multicultural education. Those viewing multicultural education as a necessary evil may merely implement a stopgap approach to appease the vocal minority while those viewing it as an upgrading

of the educational process will see the demand for multicultural education as symptomatic of the general student cry for curriculum relevance. In the latter case, a multicultural curriculum has the potential of becoming a very viable and exciting concept.

Educators constantly ask what they can do to educate minorities. An appropriate reply to such a concern is that educators should first educate themselves. There is no sarcasm intended here. Nor should the brevity of the response in any way assume a simplistic solution. To multiculturalize the curriculum requires a change in attitudes, materials, and instructional methodologies. To equip ourselves to participate in this change, we need to examine both the nature of, the rationale for, and the viable methods of implementing such a multicultural emphasis.

A thorough understanding of multiculturalism necessitates a close examination of the more basic concept of "culture." Culture is not the simplistic concept that we often accord it. To the educator who is unaware of its operation, culture can become a deterministic and limiting force. The best curriculum designer is obviously the one who understands the various ways in which culture shapes the ideas and lives of our students.

In education the tendency has been to <u>equate</u> ethnicity with culture. However, if we consider "culture" as a distinctive life-way or life-style, then ethnicity is only one of the many factors which

are instrumental in determining culture. By way of illustration, let us examine what it is that "barbacoa de cabeza" (i.e., the steamed head of the cow) and "chittlings" (i.e., the boiled intestines of the hog) have in common. The obvious response is that they are both foods frequently associated with two ethnic groups - Mexican-Americans and Blacks, in that respective order. However, if I add "cracklings" (i.e., fried pork rinds), then ethnicity is no longer the common denominator. A closer examination of these foods reveals that they have all historically been considered waste products and inferior parts of the animal which the affluent culture discarded. In other words, these foods, as well as many others, that we often attributed to ethnic custom, have in fact evolved from a socio-economic basis.

The point I am attempting to make is that socio-economic status is an important factor in determining culture. People from similar socio-economic statuses often tend to act the same and have similar values. More specifically, people from the culture of poverty, regardless of ethnicity, will tend to possess similar characteristics which will in turn affect their life-way. The way in which poverty or near poverty affects children and their learning potential is an area that we as educators have not truly explored. In Texas, especially, this is a major concern since according to a recent study, among all Texas families with children under the age of six, twenty-eight percent

are in poverty while another twenty-six percent are in near poverty. This means that over half of all Texas families with children under six are engaged in a day-to-day struggle for a minimal quality of living.[1]

Other factors of culture include geographical, occupational, religious, and generational characteristics. These must be considered if we are to avoid stereotypic explanations of ethnic groups.

American educators have long been cognizant of the cultural diversity within our society, yet in formulating curricula for the schools, they have rejected culturally pluralistic curricula, favoring instead curricula that have traditionally been directed toward Anglo, middle-class students. The experience and contributions of various ethnic groups have for the most part been entirely eliminated from the public school curricula.

One major factor contributing to culturally exclusive curricula was the growth of cultural determinism in the fifties and sixties as a major theory to explain the academic failure of ethnic minorities in terms of different cultural values. One frequently encountered tables listing the cultural "values" of Anglo-Americans in contrast to those of the various ethnic minorities. This difference in cultural "values," it was argued, programmed the particular ethnic group for failure in the academic world. Such a philosophy manifested itself on one hand in remedial programs for the so-called "culturally deficient" or

"culturally disadvantaged" and on the other hand in curriculum materials and learning experiences which were void of a culturally pluralistic concept. By confusing life styles with cultural "values," educators erroneously compiled characteristics, conditioned to a large degree by socio-economic status or enviornment, which were thought to be representative of the ethnic culture per se.

That the culturally and linguistically different ethnic minorities have suffered as a result of such culturally impoverished curricula is understandable. Academically, he has met with a high rate of failure. Psychologically, he has often developed a negative self-concept and/or a problem of self-identity as he saw his culture, history, and language either demeaned or ignored. And intellectually, he has been deprived of a tremendous wealth of cultural and historical experience. Non-minority students and educators have likewise remained isolated from such wealth, thus perpetuating numerous misconceptions.

Equality of educational opportunities for minority students should not be interpreted as a uniformity of curriculum and instructional approaches. Students as individuals have different needs. Minority students are no exception. A multicultural curriculum approach must take into consideration the biological and psychological needs of the student as well as his academic needs. Too often teachers get the impression that multiculturalizing the curriculum simply means introducing ethnic content or culturally different materials.

In multiculturalizing the curriculum there are two basic realities we should consider - the student reality and the teacher reality. The student reality may be divided into the following three areas: environmental, psychological, and academic. The enviornmental reality, which includes the student's family life, parents, neighborhood, peer group, and socio-economic status is extremely important since it has such a bearing on his academic development, not to mention his psychological and social development as well. For example, minority children from a lower socio-economic status may have differences in language development, concept development, role models, educational atmosphere, and experiental background which put them at a disadvantage in the academic process. Studies show that there is a high correlation between socio-economic status and test scores on standardized achievement tests. As educators we need to remember that it is the student's environment, not his ethnicity per se, that is going to help determine his ability to do well in the educational program. Psychologically, we may find the minority student suffering from a negative self-concept or a negative attitude toward school because of discriminatory treatment and/or low achievement. Academically, the curriculum must provide such a student with a fair chance of success. The student who sees himself at his worst in school is likely to place little value on study and to seek his role of importance outside the classroom. The low achiever is poorly motivated and becomes either a

discipline problem or eventually a drop-out.

The teacher reality, on the other hand, is that teacher attitudes often have a major bearing on the success or failure of the minority student in the classroom. Differences in ethnicity, socio-economic status, experiential background, and values between the teacher and the minority student can affect the quality of instruction and the objectivity of teacher evaluation. Teachers need to examine their own prejudices and stereotypes and avoid labelling students on the basis of past achievement, school records, siblings, or conversations with other teachers.

In a multicultural approach it is usually the cognitive domain of learning which receives the greater emphasis. Ethnic literature, history, language, folklore, art, music, and customs can easily be incorporated into the curriculum. Numerous materials are available in these different areas for the different ethnic minorities. However, these materials must be examined for their suitability to the particular target group. Such factors as geographical locale, degree of acculturation, and dominant language must be considered.

There are two basic ways of multiculturalizing the curriculum-the "separate" approach and the "integrated" approach. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. Under the separate approach I include the elective ethnic studies courses, usually of a general nature

dealing with one specific ethnic group. This course is frequently found at the high school level and is advantageous in that it can be handled by one hopefully qualified person. Likewise, since the course is an elective, students enrolled normally have a sincere interest in the course. Obviously, with an elective ethnic studies course little change is required in the overall high school curriculum program. For this very reason, such an approach can justly be c criticized for its failure to do other than momentarily meet the needs of a few students. What tends to happen is that ninety to ninety-five percent of the student body receives no exposure to a multicultural curriculum. Unfortunately, some administrators have used the elective ethnic studies course as a stopgap to quiet students desiring a multicultural emphasis.

Another type of "separate" approach is the incorporation of multicultural units into specific subjects. For example a two-week unit on black history may be incorporated into a course on United States history or a two-week unit on Mexican-American literature may be included within an American literature course. One obvious advantage of the unit approach is that it doesn't drastically alter the existing curriculum. Also, a great many students receive exposure, though admittedly brief, to a multicultural emphasis. The major disadvantage, however, is that the unit approach tends to fragment the subject discipline. In essence the student gets the impression

that black history, to use the previous example, is somehow separate from United States history. Many see the unit approach as being "token" in nature, arguing that separation connotes a "difference" which in turn connotes an "inferior" status.

By the "integrated" approach to multiculturalizing the curriculum, I am referring to the process of totally integrating multicultural materials, learning experiences, teaching strategies, etc. into the existing curriculum all the way through. Again to use an example stated above, an American literature course would examine literary works by various racial and ethnic groups, perhaps doing comparative exercises within the different literary genres. Ethnic content or contributions would not be studied in isolation but would be discussed in relationship to the particular literary form, period, theme, style, etc. under consideration.

The major disadvantage of the "integrated" approach is that it is difficult to handle, involving much curriculum alteration. Understandably, the teacher will need to have a broader knowledge of the various ethnic materials and the most effective ways of incorporating them. The advantage, on the other hand, is that the student sees the relationship or continuity in the subject matter since the discipline is not fragmented into individual ethnic studies units.

I am of the opinion that the "integrated" approach to

multiculturalizing the curriculum is the most meaningful. What is needed is a sincere committment to the concept of multicultural education, whereby the entire educational process both understands and builds into the program the culturally, experientially, and socio-economically pluralistic make-up of our society. Only then will we see some significant gains in improving the quality of education for minorities.

Like Jonathan Livingston Seagull, all of us need to look with more understanding and keep finding ourselves a little more each day, to push aside the limiting forces, in our race to learn.

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Footnotes

[1] "Texas Household Survey of Families with Children Under Six," 1973. Commissioned by the Department of Community Affairs: Office of Early Childhood, Austin, Texas.